

SECOND PETER

Lesson 2

Foundations for Growth

2 Peter 1:2-4

The moment an elected president of the United States is sworn into office he is given all the authority and power and prerogatives of the office. Because of his new position, he has unbelievable powers, but how he uses those powers will determine whether he is a success or failure as president. What he has positionally and what he does experientially are related, but they are not the same. He can use the position effectively or he can abuse it.

This same concept of having a position of authority and power and using it effectively is what 2 Peter 1:2-11 is about. In verses 2-4, we see God's work; in 5-11, we see man's work. The first section speaks of God's sovereignty and the second of man's responsibility. The first deals with the Christian's position before God; the second deals with man's experience. Verses 2-4 deal with principles or foundations for spiritual growth. It tells us what God has done in His sovereignty so we can grow spiritually. This is a very precious section of Scripture.

By way of review, the persecuted and suffering church which received the letter of 1 Peter had become divided because of false teachers who had entered into the local congregations. These false teachers were apostates who had known the truth of Christianity and turned from it completely. They were Gnostics (from the Greek word gnosis which means knowledge.) They believed that all the answers to life could be found in human reason. It was reason that led to salvation and happiness. Their idea was getting to God by moving back through His offspring called aeons, emanations, semi-gods or angelic beings. The lowest aeon was totally wicked and the highest was almost perfect.

Through the intellectual process, a Gnostic believed he could become more and more spiritual as he moved back toward God through these aeons. The process of becoming more spiritual, becoming a partaker of the divine nature, took place in the head through certain truths known only to Gnostics. Salvation was an intellectual knowledge of esoteric truth, not a changed life. Gnostics thought it impossible to change wicked, sinful flesh. The mind could be changed but not the sinful body so Gnostics often lived immoral lives while they claimed to have all intellectual understanding. This was the heresy that had entered into the Asian local churches.

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE (1:2)

“Grace and peace be multiplied unto you”

Grace and peace were Paul's constant prayer for his Christian friends. In the first verse of 2 Peter 1, Peter explained to these Christians how they had received saving faith from God's gracious hand, but in this verse he prays that they might experience sanctifying grace, growing spiritually and maturing in their Christian walks. Sanctifying grace means one is to change as he is confronted with the truth of Scripture.

All Christians need God's grace to change because change does not come easily and often grates against the evil nature in us. These Christians were to be experiencing life changes in the realm of moral and ethical holiness. They were not to be like the Gnostics who were interested only in head knowledge without changed life styles.

Peter also prays for sanctifying peace in their lives so they would not become dissatisfied and open themselves to all kinds of false teachings that promise new, exciting super-exhilarating experiences which in the end bring only slavery, drudgery and despair. Peter prays that grace and peace will not only be given but that it will also be multiplied because God is interested in changed lives and not just intellectual pursuits of Christianity.

“in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Grace and peace came through a knowledge of Christ, who is our God. The phrase “God and of Jesus Christ our Lord” should be translated “God, even Jesus Christ our Lord.” The word “knowledge” is not the Greek *gnosis* from which Gnostic came but *epignosis*, meaning full, perfect, precise knowledge. Peter is not talking about factual, intellectual knowledge about Christ, but about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ which comes through an understanding and application of the Word of God to one's experience. Christians are to know Christ in a special way so that their Christianity does not become a sham profession or mere intellectual assent to facts, but a living, vital, dynamic walk with Christ through an understanding of the Word.

Knowledge of facts does not make us grow spiritually per se; it is yielding to the Christ of Scripture that makes for real growth in the Christian life. A person with a lot of knowledge but little vital faith will be indifferent and critical spiritually. A person with a small amount of knowledge but a large amount of faith can have a deep walk with the Lord because he is operating faithfully on what truth he does have. He may, however, have zeal without knowledge.

The ideal is a large amount of understanding and a large portion of faith which should produce a mature Christian over a period of years. The very worst place for a Christian to be is to have a head full of knowledge and a heart full of stone. This produces a Christian cynic. The person with an intimate relationship with Christ is the Christian growing in grace and knowledge of Him. “*but grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Peter 3:18). *Epignosis*, then, is full, practical, experiential knowledge of Christ, not a head jammed with facts.

This full knowledge is ours positionally right now. “*In whom (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (Col. 2:3). Christ is ours, and everything we need to know to be effective Christians is found in Him and the inspired Word. Now it is our task or duty to discover the treasures of wisdom and knowledge by faith, and that is a lifetime process. The more spiritual gold we seek, the more we shall find and the more we shall be blessed.

PROVISION OF LIFE AND GODLINESS (1:3)

“seeing that”

This goes back to verse two, and Peter wants us to know how grace and peace can experientially be a part of our lives as Christians. We can experience sanctifying grace and

peace, perhaps not perfectly, but progressively, in our Christian lives. How? The next phrase tells us.

“His divine power has granted to us everything we need for life and godliness.”

This verse is absolutely breath-taking. Everything, yes, everything we need for life and godliness has been granted to us already by God. The gift of faith is great, but the gift of life and godliness is even greater.

First, we should note that divine, sovereign, omnipotent power has given us every provision for life and godliness. God’s power is the power that overcomes all resistance and He gives us, in love, mercy and compassion, the tools necessary for life and godliness. If we are Christians today, we have been touched by God’s sovereign power. His large hand of generosity has given us everything we need to be spiritual men and women. It is divine power that is behind our salvation. *“For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” (1 Thess. 1:5).*

Peter used several words in these verses which came right out of the secular religious language of the first century Greek. The words “divine power” were often used of Zeus, the greatest of Greek gods. The word “godliness” was a term for reverence. “Divine nature” was commonly used to speak of being somehow absorbed into deity. These words have been found in extra biblical writings of the day. They had great meaning to the pagan world.

Peter took pagan language and used it in a polemical way. He took the words of his opponents and filled them with sound Christian meaning. This certainly gives us some precedent for adapting the biblical message to the language and culture of our day as long as no truth or principle is violated.

Second, the terms “life” and “godliness” are extremely important if we are going to understand how to effectively live the Christian life. God has granted the Christian eternal life—a vital, dynamic, animated life. *“I (Christ) came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly” (John 10:10).* It is experiencing in a full, spiritual way the eternal life we already possess.

There is a sense in which we all have eternal life if we are Christians. *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).* In another sense, we are to lay hold of our spiritual life by faith. *“Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” (1 Tim. 6:12).* Eternal life is ours, but we experience it by operating on faith.

The word “godliness” means piety. The emphasis is not on the devotional aspect but on practical living. What is godliness? Is it living in a monastery? Is it conforming to man-made rules and regulations? Is it using certain Christian phrases? Is it attending church every time the doors open? Is it reading Christian books? No, godliness is relating everything in life to Christ to please Him. It is bringing every thought into captivity to Christ. *“We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,” (2 Cor. 10:5).*

True piety is having one’s mind transformed by the power of God. *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).*

Godliness is internal, but it affects our external behavior. It may be manifested a little differently by each individual because of backgrounds, personalities and general ways of looking at life, but without godliness (holiness) to some degree, no one who professes Christ is truly saved. *“Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification (holiness) without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).*

God has given everything the Christian needs to live a godly life—the Holy Spirit, the promises, commands and principles of Scripture, the capacity for faith, a regenerated will that is being set free, and many other things. Why then are we not automatically spiritual? Because we must exercise faith. All things are granted to us, and all things are ours, but we must operate on faith to discover these things and develop them. Faith is the difference. If our faith is weak, our Christian experience is weak.

Third, it should be noted that since God has granted all that we ever need for life and godliness, then this is important for refuting modern-day Gnostics who keep talking about intellectual knowledge, not caring about a changed life morally and ethically. Since God has given the Christian a new life, then that life will manifest itself in a new life-style.

Those who are not true Christians, whose professions of Christ are spurious, external, emotional or intellectual, will sooner or later manifest the fact that they do not have eternal life by the ungodliness of their lives. If there is no manifestation of a changed life, there is no reason to think one has the salvation referred to in the Word of God. This is not denying the doctrine of eternal security, for once a person is saved, he can never be lost, but once a person is truly saved, he can never be the same again. The man who has true faith in Christ will manifest that life to some degree in a Christ-like life style. For sure, we should never comfort a sinning Christian with the doctrine of eternal security, for this will only encourage him in his sin and prolong his dealing with it in true repentance.

This doctrine, known as the perseverance of the saints, does not mean a Christian cannot sin or even fall into grievous sin at times such as King David with Bathsheba. However, in the life of a true believer, there is a leaning, a bent, a propensity towards righteousness in Christ and a turning away from the sin of the world.

“through the knowledge of Him”

Life and godliness comes through (by means of) the true knowledge (living, practical, experiential) of Jesus Christ. The experiencing of a full spiritual life and godliness cannot come from a purely intellectual approach. There must be a true piety based on the Word of God, but if there is no heart for Christ, there is only cold, dead, orthodoxy which results in a very critical, negative, bitter and judgmental spirit. Life and godliness are experienced when we are deeply in love with the Lord Jesus Christ and are seeking to obey His holy law.

“who called us.”

Peter reminds his readers that it was God (or probably Christ in this context) who called them to salvation. Again, Peter is stressing sovereign grace through the efficacious, infallible call of God to salvation. The only reason we can love Christ, pursue life and godliness, experience grace and peace, is because God, by His own sovereign choice, called us to be Christians. Since He called us, He wants us to live holy lives. *“For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification (holiness)” (1 Thess. 4:7).*

“by His own glory and excellence.”

“Glory” and “excellence” probably refer to the holy character of Jesus Christ. When Christ was presented to these Christians they saw His separated, sinless, perfect life, and they were impressed with His character. He was the Sinless One who died for sinners.

A knowledge of His perfect person and death was used by God to draw and call these folks to Christ. This is why we must hold up Christ before sinners. Yes, they must know about sin, judgment, hell, faith, repentance and heaven, but most of all they must see Jesus because it is Christ who saves.

When Philip spoke to the Ethiopian in Acts 8:35 we are told, *“and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.”* The Sovereign Christ will most certainly attract people to Himself for He is the loveliest person in the universe, and to get to know Him is eternal life.

PRECIOUS PROMISES (1:4a)

“For by these”

This apparently goes back to “glory” and “excellence.” It was through Christ’s perfect life and his ignominious death for sin that He secured many precious promises for the Church of Jesus Christ. In His life, death and resurrection, Christ secured the promises of the New Covenant for His people.

“He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises”

God has not only granted us saving faith and made provision for life and godliness, but now He also declares that He has given precious and magnificent promises to live by. These promises of the New Covenant are of great value in supporting and comforting the soul. God has given them, and He will honor them. He stands behind His promises with His very nature, His character, and His magnificence. They are sure and certain. Anything and everything that involves the plan of salvation has specific promises connected with it, including forgiveness to the sinful, strength for the weak, comfort for the weary, hope for the dying, heaven for the patient and the second advent for the downtrodden. There are thousands of promises in the Bible and God has put them there to be claimed by faith. If they are not claimed by faith, then there will never be any true experiencing of the power of Christ in our lives.

Growth in the Christian life is not made by intellectual pursuits but by faith in the promises of God. Therefore, Christians should seek to know the promises and claim them by faith, believing God for deliverance. We must acquaint ourselves with Scripture. We will never find fulfillment in our lives and really become the persons God wants us to be unless we understand the Word of God and operate on faith!

PARTAKERS OF THE DIVINE NATURE (1:4b)

“in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature”

God has given the promises of Scripture in order that Christians might partake of His divine nature. The moment a person is born of God's Spirit, he becomes a partaker of the divine nature in the most elementary form. As that person claims the promises of God and grows in practical understanding of Christ and His program, he will progressively become more of a partaker of the divine nature.

“But He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness (Heb. 12:10.)

“But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Christians are partakers of the divine nature, but they progressively discover the realities of this.

To partake of the divine nature does not mean that all things are now God or a part of God as the Pantheists believe. Nor does it mean that we are being absorbed into God as the Buddhist believe. We are in no way becoming gods as the Gnostics teach. No one can do that. Even John Calvin made a theological slip when interpreting this passage saying, “These promises have been given to us to deify us.” He did not believe we are becoming gods; he simply made a poor choice of words as preachers and teachers sometimes do. Becoming partakers of the divine nature means that we are becoming more like God in certain characteristics, not in all aspects.

No man can have part in the incommunicable characteristics or attributes of God—His self-sufficiency, unchangeableness, infinity, etc. There are, however, communicable attributes such as knowledge, wisdom, goodness, love, holiness, righteousness, truth, etc., which humans can experience to some degree. Man can become more Godlike in accordance to the moral nature of God, but he can never become God.

Partaking of the divine nature is not just intellectual gymnastics, as the Gnostics claimed, with no change in moral behavior. Partaking of the divine nature demands moral change to some degree or we have not partaken of the divine nature at all.

“having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.”

Peter seems to be dealing with a fact, not simply an experience. The *aorist* tense in the Greek speaks of a definitive act or break. Every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has escaped the corruption of the world positionally. Christians have been cut off positionally from the world in God's sight, but in actual experience they still are escaping the corruptions that are in the world by lust. The way to escape is to claim the promises, obey God and partake more and more of the divine nature. Corruption means anything that defiles and pollutes and destroys.

How can we escape if we do not know the promises and apply them? Without God's promises we could not escape the world's corruption. We would be caught in a mesh of lies and deceit without the truth from God. Corruption is in this world because of lusts (passions— not necessarily sexual passion, although this is included).

Three passions are at the root of all human evil: lust, which means sexual passions in a wrong sense, which destroys the body; greed, which is materialism; and ambition, the

pride of spirit that seeks popularity, fame and the praise of man. These three passions are wrecking the lives of men and women all over the world, and God delivers His people from these things as they understand and obey His Word. How well are you fleeing from the corruption and lusts of the world? Do you know the promises? Are you operating on faith?

CONCLUSION

What does God want us Christians to learn from this passage? First, head knowledge of Christian truth, while important, does not make us grow spiritually unless we exercise faith. Intellectual Christianity is deadening.

Second, God has provided all we need in Christ, the promises and His divine power for our enjoyment of spiritual life and the pursuit of godliness. These things are ours and we must claim them by faith. They cannot be obtained by reasoning.

Third, since God has provided all we need for life and godliness, then we must not always be looking for some new experience, some different action, some further revelation, some ecstatic feeling. We have all we need and we are to lay hold of Christ by faith.

Fourth, all of us have the same position and privileges—saving faith, fullness of Christ, life and godliness, precious promises and a divine nature. Someone has said, “Even the weakest believer holds in his hands all that the mightiest saint ever possessed.” The basic difference between Christians are personalities, spiritual gifts and the exercising of faith.

Fifth, a professing Christian who has no desire for godliness is probably no Christian at all.

If you are without Christ, God has given some precious promises for you. If you will lay hold of these promises by faith, God will save you, make you a partaker of the divine nature and give you eternal life and a desire for godliness.

“For ‘Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved’ (Rom. 10:13).

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” (John 11:25-26).